

Shakespeare's She-Wolves:

Stereotype to Surreal

Introduction

As Shakespeare's writing style developed throughout his career, so did his ability to write characters. At the beginning of his career, most of his female characters derive from stereotypes and other stock character tropes familiar to Early Modern audiences; but by the end of his career, he was writing some of the most infamous women of the stage. There are a variety of theatrical archetypal women that he utilized, but a crowd-favorite was the She-wolf. Although the archetype of the She-wolf is historically deeply rooted in misogyny, her role in the evolution of female characters on stage is undeniable. Seen as dangerously desirable by men and powerful by women, the She-wolf rose in popularity in the 1580s because of an increase in demand for Senecan-like plays.¹

She-wolves were characteristically beautiful and attractive, but they "lacked the gentler qualities usually associated with [their] sex and instead tends to acts of gratuitous and excessive evil."² An early Shakespearean example of this, and probably his first, is Margaret of Anjou from the *Henry VI* trilogy and *Richard III*. Based on a historic figure, Shakespeare used the history and legends surrounding her life to create one of the most powerful female characters in his histories, yet she remains incredibly stereotyped. Slightly later in one of his earliest tragedies, and entirely an invention of his own mind, Shakespeare wrote Tamora, Queen of the Goths for *Titus Andronicus*. While Margaret strays from some stereotypes because of Shakespeare's source material, Tamora is characteristically a She-wolf in every sense of the word. There are multiple other examples of Shakespearean She-wolves throughout his career, but perhaps his most infamous comes near the end of his career in one of his mature tragedies, *Lady Macbeth*. *Lady*

¹ Mann, David. 2012. "Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping." In *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 154.

² Mann, "Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping," 154.

Macbeth would go on to become a literary and theatrical icon for generations to come and is a far more emotionally complex and fully realized character than either Tamora or Margaret.

When it comes to stereotypes and tropes on stage, it is important to understand their roots. Early Modern beliefs about the female body heavily influenced playwrights when it came to characterization:

The female body was associated with contamination and sin. Contemporary medical attitudes about menstruation held that the female body was a site of contagion and uncleanness, and many contemporary theologians argued that women, like their foremother Eve, were more susceptible to temptation and more likely to repeat the fall. Some men feared the possibility of the sexualized female body running rampant and subjecting patriarchal civilization to the chaotic forces of nature. Although this fear of the dis-orderly woman may have been the result of displaced anxieties about the social upheavals of the period, to many people in the early modern period, unruly women suggested a very real threat.³

Humourism is a patriarchal understanding of the human body that lacks nuance or scientific grounds, but it was the primary biological belief system in the Early Modern Period. This essay sets out to examine the role of Early Modern ideas about powerful women, their bodies, and how they are represented in Shakespeare's evolution of the She-wolf.

She-Wolves

The term She-wolf is not just used for the stage, it is a historic term used to categorize many medieval queens who did not fit neatly into the conventions of what a woman should be. There is a rich history of the relationship between the church, women, and wolves, beginning with the story of Romulus and Remus:

As the wolf is the very archetype of the beast in western narrative and imagology, its persecution is not surprising. Moreover, the negative overtones attached to the she-wolf are also obvious. Never mind that a lupa nursed the male founders of the

³ Dunn-Hensley, Susan. 2003. "Whore Queens: The Sexualized Female Body and the State." In *"High and Mighty Queens" of Early Modern England: Realities and Representations*, edited by Carole Levin, Jo Eldridge Carney, and Debra Barrett-Graves. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 105.

very centre of western civilization, Rome. Lupa was, in Latin, the name given to a prostitute. Female promiscuousness is evoked in many narratives, highbrow or from folklore, about she-wolves and women. Also, lupus and lucis are almost homophonous, thus the suggestion of the “fall” from grace, light, and control of the former, like that of Lucifer, is inevitable.⁴

Scholars believe that it might have been Shakespeare himself who coined the term She-wolf in 1591/2 in *Henry VI part 3*, but the term has since been used in a broader historical text. In 2008, Elizabeth Norton published *She Wolves the Notorious Queens of England*, a biography about the Medieval queens who were more “notorious” rather than “saintly.”⁵ Norton asks the question of what makes a queen notorious, and the conclusion is rooted in patriarchal ideas:

The Anglo-Saxons believed that a good queen was a passive one, fertile and religious but of no political consequence during her husband’s reign, with only the potentially powerful role of queen mother to look forward to... Anglo-Saxon queens were not expected to take action for their own benefit, instead acting through the medium of their male kinsmen.⁶

The archetype of the She-wolf was so prominent in historic discussion and Early Modern society, that it easily found its way to the stage. There are numerous examples of this archetype throughout Shakespeare’s canon, and they tend to have one or more of the following attributes: they often “urge men to hurt other women,” “lack normal affections,” kill children, and are “aggressive adulteresses.”⁷ These women are connected in many ways, both through the historic stereotypes that bind them, and their legacies on the stage.

⁴ Percec, Dana, and Andrea Serban. 2022. “Lions and She-Wolves: Kingship, Queenship and the Legitimacy of Power in Shakespeare’s Historical Plays,” 173.

⁵ Percec, and Serban, “Lions and She-Wolves,” 174.

⁶ Norton, Elizabeth. 2011. *She Wolves: The Notorious Queens of Medieval England*. London, England: History Press, 8.

⁷ Mann, “Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping,” 154-55.

Margaret of Anjou, She-Wolf of France

Written between 1591/2, *Henry VI parts 2 and 3* are some of Shakespeare's earliest plays. Margaret of Anjou is one of the most prominent characters in Shakespeare's Wars of the Roses cycle; however, she "plays a historically disproportionate role in shaping both the political landscape and the attitudes of those around her."⁸ Shakespeare dramatized her life for the sake of his plays, but her reputation as a She-wolf is not limited to her life on Shakespeare's stage. She is one of history's infamous She-wolves, although her legacy from Shakespeare might have perpetuated this. When she first appears in the historic chronology of the plays, she is a young princess who is betrothed to King Henry VI of England. Very early into Shakespeare's narrative, she has an ongoing affair with the Duke of Suffolk. Although there is no evidence that the real Margaret of Anjou had an affair, this plot line is vital for Shakespeare's characterization of her as a She-wolf.

The purity of women was of the upmost importance in Early Modern England. Humoral theory left much to be questioned and feared about the female body, this led to the villainization of women's sexuality. It was a commonly held belief that women were morally inferior to men, this was mainly due Christian beliefs surrounding "the fall." Religious leaders preached about "human sexuality and its potential for disrupting an ordered society; [and how] women, in particular, were seen as both morally unreliable and constant sources of temptation to men."⁹ Problematic ideas about conception and consent would lead to the argument that "if female pleasure is unnecessary for conception, women's notorious appetite for sexual enjoyment, previously naturalized as essential for fertility and health, becomes a manifestation of willfulness

⁸ Dunn-Hensley, "Whore Queens," 163.

⁹ Baskin, Judith. 2016. "Jewish Traditions About Women and Gender Roles: From Rabbinic Teachings to Medieval Practice." In *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, edited by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras. London, England: Oxford University Press, 54.

and perversity.”¹⁰ Women who leaned into their sexuality were seen as unnatural and monstrous. The temptation they offered men was a threat to the stability of society. The discussion of Margaret’s body, be that as an adulterous queen, or even a mother, dominates her role in Shakespeare’s canon.

In addition to her affair with Suffolk, Margaret also opposes gender norms by being outspoken and blatantly antagonizes her husband in public multiple times. She also uses her body as leverage against her him to get him to do as she pleases:

And seeing thou dost, I here divorce myself
Both from thy table, Henry, and thy bed,
Until that act of Parliament be repealed
Whereby my son is disinherited.
-Henry VI part 3 I.i, (247-250)¹¹

Although she is acting as a response to her identity as a mother, she is actively sexualizing herself. Her “unladylike” behavior continues when she carries the severed head of her lover throughout the castle:

Oft have I heard that grief softens the mind
And makes it fearful and degenerate.
Think therefore on revenge, and cease to weep.
But who can cease to weep and look on this?
Here may his head lie on my throbbing breast,
But where’s the body that I should embrace?
-Henry VI part 2 IV.iv, (1-6)¹²

Finally, the pinnacle of her unnatural and monstrous behavior occurs in *Henry VI part 3* act I, scene iv. In her quest for revenge, Margaret has hunted York down across a battlefield, she places him atop a molehill (66-69), taunts him with a napkin stained with the blood of his dead

¹⁰ Park, Katharine. 2016. “Medicine and Natural Philosophy: Naturalistic Traditions.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, edited by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras. London, England: Oxford University Press, 114.

¹¹ Shakespeare, William. “King Henry VI, Part 3.”

¹² Shakespeare, “King Henry VI, Part 2.”

son (79-83), mocks him by placing a paper crown upon his head (92-98), and orders his head to be cut off (107-108). York then delivers a speech where he directly refers to her as a She-Wolf:

She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France,
Whose tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth!
How ill-beseeming is it in thy sex
To triumph, like an Amazonian trull,
Upon their woes whom fortune captivates!
But that thy face is, vizard-like, unchanging,
Made impudent with use of evil deeds,
I would assay, proud queen, to make thee blush.
To tell thee whence thou camest, of whom derived,
Were shame enough to shame thee, wert thou not shameless.
-Henry VI part 3 I.iv, (111-120)¹³

Shakespeare's clear depiction of Margaret as monstrous hinges on her identity as a woman. Following this list of insults, he continues with a highly misogynistic list of what a woman should be:

'Tis beauty that doth oft make women proud;
But, God he knows, thy share thereof is small:
'Tis virtue that doth make them most admired;
The contrary doth make thee wonder'd at:
'Tis government that makes them seem divine;
The want thereof makes thee abominable:
Thou art as opposite to every good
As the Antipodes are unto us,
Or as the south to the septentrion.
O tiger's heart wrapt in a woman's hide!
How couldst thou drain the life-blood of the child,
To bid the father wipe his eyes withal,
And yet be seen to bear a woman's face?
Women are soft, mild, pitiful and flexible;
Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless.
-Henry VI part 3 I.iv, (128-142)¹⁴

York has declared that Margaret lacks the qualities of a true woman, due to her cruel "tiger heart." Margaret is on a bloodthirsty quest for revenge and stabs him before ordering for

¹³ Shakespeare, "King Henry VI, Part 3."

¹⁴ Shakespeare, "King Henry VI, Part 3."

his head to be set on the Gates of York, “So York may overlook the town of York” (179-180).

This speech is an interesting insight into the thought process that Shakespeare might have had while developing the character of Margaret.

Tamora, Queen of the Goths

Written in 1594, *Titus Andronicus* is one of Shakespeare’s earliest tragedies. It features probably one of the clearest dichotomies between stereotyped women in Early Modern society: the villainous Tamora, and the virtuous Lavinia. Tamora is one of the two most villainous characters in the play, which directly juxtaposes her role as a mother, or at least the ideal mother. Tamora’s identity as a mother is so explicitly linked to her identity throughout the text. She is power-hungry and she “sets about achieving her aims in a way that is explicitly maternal.”¹⁵ Her quest for vengeance against Titus begins with the death of her son:

I’ll find a day to massacre them all,
And raze their faction and their family,
The cruel father and his traitorous sons
To whom I sued for my dear son’s life,
And make them know what ‘tis to let a queen
Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.
-Titus Andronicus I.i, (455-460)¹⁶

Her dedication to vengeance, although a response to the murder of her son, immediately paints her as an unconventional woman. Tamora’s sexuality blended with her identity as a mother makes her a particularly dangerous woman in the eyes of society. Throughout the play, she uses her body to manipulate her husband. She also has an infamous affair with Aaron which leads to her giving birth to an illegitimate child, whom she immediately orders to be killed:

¹⁵ Dunn-Hensley, “Whore Queens,” 132.

¹⁶ Shakespeare, “Titus Andronicus.”

Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad
Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime.
The empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal,
And bids thee christen it with thy dagger's point.
-Titus Andronicus IV.ii, (69-72)¹⁷

Although the root of her quest for vengeance against the Andronici stems from the unjust death of her son, she does not hesitate to order this child to be slain when it poses a threat to revealing her secret affair. Her relationship with her other two sons, Chiron and Demetrius, is also rather uncomfortable. They do not hesitate to defend their mother's honor and slay Bassianus in act II, scene ii. They then follow their mother's orders to rape and mutilate Lavinia. Lavinia claims "'tis true, the raven doth not hatch a lark" (II.ii, 149) meaning that Chiron and Demetrius cannot be good because they came from a foul mother, thus vilifying Tamora's identity as a mother.

Tamora's identity as an unnatural mother comes full circle at the end of the play when she ingests her sons in the pie that Titus has baked for the banquet:

Why, there they are, both baked in this pie,
Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,
Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.
-Titus Andronicus V.iii, (59-61)¹⁸

The idea of a mother ingesting her children creates a fascinating parallel with the looming pit that Shakespeare has created in the forest. The pit serves both a literal and metaphorical purpose in the play, and draws on humoral ideas of the female body:

The pit is the womb of the feminized earth, and it represents the full spectrum of female threat: the "nothingness" of the sexual organs, the devouring womb, the uncontrollable forces of nature and female desire. The images of blood associated with the pit suggest menstruation, breaking of the hymen, and childbirth, as well as death, for the Earth's womb is also a tomb. Martius and Quintus's anxiety when faced with the pit mirrors early modern anxiety about the female body. Throughout Act II, the devouring womb in the forest is connected to Tamora's

¹⁷ Shakespeare, "Titus Andronicus."

¹⁸ Shakespeare, "Titus Andronicus."

contaminating womb. It is Tamora who introduces the pit to the audience through her story of Bassianus and Lavinia's attempt to kill her. Her imagination links the pit with terror, madness, and death.¹⁹

In the words of Lavinia: “No Grace? No womanhood? Ah, beastly creature,/The blot and enemy to our general name,” (II.ii, 182-183).²⁰ Tamora clearly resides outside of the realm of what women are supposed to be, she “violates the boundaries of her feminine role” by committing violence against another woman, being an agent of revenge, carrying out an affair, abusing her identity as a mother, participating in battle, and exerting power over Rome.²¹ Tamora herself “illustrates male fear of the transgressive, contaminating female.”²²

Lady Macbeth, Queen of Scotland

Written in 1606, *Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's more mature tragedies, and with that comes characters who are more fully realized, including the female characters. Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most fascinating female characters, and for reasons that are rather surprising considering the origins of her archetype. Lady Macbeth is “an assimilation of the convention into a more human, at times even humdrum form, and an interesting adaptation of a stereotype to encompass a whole series of other archetypal associations.”²³ She certainly comes from the She-Wolf tradition; she is a woman who gains power through the manipulation of her husband, lacks motherly qualities, and is known to perpetuate violence against other women and children. Lady Macbeth also arguably dabbles in witchcraft, which was inherently evil,

¹⁹ Dunn-Hensley, “Whore Queens,” 108.

²⁰ Shakespeare, “Titus Andronicus.”

²¹ Sentov, Ana. 2014. “‘Unnatural Hags’: Shakespeare's Evil Women in Titus Andronicus, King Lear and Macbeth.”

²² Dunn-Hensley, “Whore Queens,” 105.

²³ Mann, “Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping,” 157.

unnatural, and feminine. In her first appearance on stage, she transcends all sense of gender norms, she performs a type of incantation:

Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever, in your sightless substances,
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, 'Hold, hold.'
-Macbeth I.v, (38-52)²⁴

She is asking to be “unsexed” so that she will no longer feel any womanly weakness as she proceeds into the turbulence of the deeds which the Macbeths are about to commit. Here, she is defying the definition of what it means to be a woman when she asks for her milk to be taken “for gall,” implying that breasts and breastfeeding are representative of her womanhood. Lady Macbeth’s identity as a mother is less clear than it is in the cases of Margaret or Tamora. In act I, scene v, she tells her husband: “I have given suck, and know/How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me” (I.v, 54-55); however, there are no indications in the play whether or not they have children. This text has been interpreted many ways over time, but it stands that they are not actively parents, and Lady Macbeth even goes on to display significant apathy towards children:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked the nipple from his boneless gums,
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.
-Macbeth I.v, (56-59)²⁵

²⁴ Shakespeare, “Macbeth.”

²⁵ Shakespeare, “Macbeth.”

This, paired with the violence she perpetuates against Lady Macduff and her children make her uncharacteristically cold for what was expected of a woman. For one reason or another, she lacks maternal instincts.

Another thing that sets Lady Macbeth apart from the earlier She-Wolves is her loyalty to her husband. Their marital dynamic is imperative to the play. She may berate and manipulate him, but she never commits adultery. She is a good wife, but she is not a good woman. She usurps her role as a good woman by plotting regicide, and then breaking ancient traditions of hospitality.²⁶

Perhaps the most iconic part of Lady Macbeth's character is her "mad scene." This seems to be a case of Melancholy, which was "especially conducive to crime."²⁷ However, "there is not a more explicit connection between female madness and guilt, although the implied guilt of sexuality is an important overtone," and Lady Macbeth is incredibly in touch with her sexuality.²⁸ Diagnoses of hysteria were not uncommon in women during this period. Many ailments were attributed to wandering womb and other humoral imbalances that were characteristically female. The trope of women going "mad" onstage was not uncommon for this period since "women were regarded as mental weaklings."²⁹

At the end of the play, so racked with grief and remorse for her actions, she loses touch with reality. The fact that Lady Macbeth feels guilt for her actions, immediately sets her apart from the other She-wolves; however, the placement of her "mad scene" and death also place her in stark contrast to the other She-wolves. Lady Macbeth's final scene "serves to confirm the

²⁶ Sentov, Ana. "Unnatural Hags."

²⁷ Kocher, Paul H. 1954. "Lady Macbeth and the Doctor." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5 (4): 346.

²⁸ Charney, Maurice, and Hanna Charney. 1977. "The Language of Madwomen in Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists." *Signs* 3 (2): 458.

²⁹ MacDonald, M. 1986. "Women and Madness in Tudor and Stuart England." *Social Research* 53 (2): 267.

female stereotype: justly punished for aspiring to be what she is not.”³⁰ David Mann notes that the She-wolves tend to be “self-sufficient” while Lady Macbeth is denied that “promise” and is “betrayed by her male player, who even before her death is announced has already shed her costume, [and] passed on to other things.”³¹ By gaining humanity, she lost the agency that comes with being such a force of cruel power on stage.

Conclusion

Fears surrounding the female body dominated Early Modern beliefs about women, and “this fear increased when the female body occupied the throne.”³² A woman in a position of power who exhibited power over men was immediately cast as monstrous. Shakespeare’s She-wolves are all incredibly in-touch with their sexuality and use it to their advantage, this falls in line with the immense stereotype and fear that women were characteristically unfaithful and dangerous. Regardless of how faithful, or unfaithful, these queens were to their husbands, none of them are characterized as virgins. Virginity was explicitly linked with “goodness.”

Shakespeare’s words hold immense power over the way historic women’s lives are immortalized. Not only did his representation of She-wolves affect history books, but also literary tradition. Shakespeare’s She-wolves began as a historically rooted archetype for villainous women and evolved into more emotionally complex women who, at the end of the day, were still all doomed by the patriarchy: “ultimately, no matter how powerful these dramatic queens are, no matter how transgressive and dangerous, they all must die, and the patriarchal order must be restored.”³³

³⁰ Mann, “Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping,” 159.

³¹ Mann, “Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping,” 159.

³² Dunn-Hensley, “Whore Queens,” 102.

³³ Dunn-Hensley, Susan. “Whore Queens,” 114.

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